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# Introduction to Volume 8, Number 1

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# Essays in Philosophy

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## Introduction to Volume 8, Number 1

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### **Searching For “Wittgenstein”** — *David Breeden*

Somebody told me Wittgenstein’s grave  
Was just over there, up the street  
Past downtown Cambridge. How could I  
After three pints of ale refuse to find

The daddy of language as we use it?  
I went, looking. For Wittgenstein’s trace,  
The man who got the metaphysical slap

Reading Tolstoy in the trenches. Prisoner  
Of war. Schoolmaster. Man who gave  
His living away. Who did a one-eighty

In his beliefs without apology. I crossed  
The Cam on a bridge, searched the alleys.  
Backtracked. Began to suspect “Wittgenstein’s

Grave is in Cambridge” might be a linguistic  
Game, a situation beyond the path of my  
Expectations. Every day is April Fool’s Day,  
After all, when we haven’t read the rules

Of the game. “Wittgenstein’s grave,” an old  
Lady said when I asked. “I don’t know.  
There’s a graveyard tucked away there.”

I searched the overgrowth. The mangled  
Stones. Searched. At last, a flat white stone.  
“Ludwig Wittgenstein 1889-1951” is all it

said. Enough. Enough for the philosopher  
of language as we use it. Enough to say  
there’s nothing here but a brisk wandering.

Wittgenstein’s shadow partly explains the extent to which the nine essays gathered in this volume,

diverse though they may be, overlap in their attention to trespass. Post-Wittgenstein, it is hardly possible to speak of philosophy or language without attending to silence as an assertion of those matters about which we cannot speak. The adumbration of silence, circling both that of which we do not speak and that of which we cannot, never quite satisfied that we know the difference, largely defines the language of philosophy.

Drawing the circle defines a boundary that *invites* trespass. These essays are concerned with the boundary between silence and speech, and they cross it in a variety of ways. But they are also particularly concerned with three additional (and not unrelated) boundaries:

1. between semantics and ethics
2. between translation studies and philosophy of language (more generally, between practice and theory)
3. between poetry and philosophy

Beneath the variety in the papers, there is general agreement that the first of these boundaries is porous, that meaning and value are inextricably connected. Theories of meaning lead theorists to theorize value—and both the making of meaning and its discernment have moral force. There is also general agreement that the second boundary invites crossing. Almost all of the authors gathered here attend explicitly to translation as integral to communication. Christopher Kelen, who gets the last word, suggests that getting lost in it may be our best hope of finding ourselves.

And that leads to the third boundary, which has, historically, been the most rigidly drawn. These essays do not propose dissolving the boundary between poetry and philosophy, but they do agree that a ceasefire in the war between the two that is supposed to have followed Plato's expulsion of poets from his ideal state is a good idea. It is worth noting, though, that Plato effected the expulsion in a sort of poem—and his poetics almost certainly made him aware that what was depicted as an expulsion was more properly a confirmation of the place poets already occupied vis-à-vis the *polis*, a delineation of edges by which the center was illuminated. We do well to remember that Plato's practice of philosophy resulted in dramatic pieces that still place the embodiment of philosophical practice—Socrates—on the edge or beyond, with the poets.

It is appropriate, then, that poets (David Breeden and Christopher Kelen) get the first and last words in this collection on *philosophy* of language—and that both evoke images of wandering, in search of Wittgenstein's grave, in a wood where things have no name. But the wandering is a *brisk* one, and there is confidence here that something can be made of language.

In the first of the nine essays, José Medina proposes to dissolve the distinction between construction and deconstruction that fuels the debate between Austin and Derrida by focusing on the *pragmatic* concept of reconstruction (one thinks particularly of Dewey here, though the reference is only implicit in Medina's paper). We are, he says, always in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the practices in which we are engaged. This directs attention to “a negotiating model of performativity”: the rules we follow, Medina says, can always be undone; the normative structures of our practices are always subject to transformation. This leads to one of the most interesting aspects of Medina's paper—his contention that performative “failures” are constitutive of success (an idea that will return in Kelen's piece at the end of the collection). The kind of “failure” that is enacted, for example, in imaginative fiction may throw light on the normative structure of “ordinary” activity. In doing so, it may call “ordinary” activity into

question by introducing the possibility of acting otherwise. This is the power of what Jerome Bruner has called *subjunctive thinking*—and, as Kelen will suggest, it is a power of particular importance to poetry, particularly as it relates to philosophy.

Adèle Mercier calls her paper an exercise in applied philosophy of language, and we might take it here as an effective demonstration of Medina's point. But she also notes that it is "about" the "roles and responsibilities of philosophers in public life." By addressing one of the most controversial of contemporary social/political issues, same-sex marriage, with the patience and care necessary to meaningful dialogue across political differences, she demonstrates just how powerful philosophy can be as a tool for civil discourse. She *listens* at length to Stainton's argument and carefully engages it in constructing her own. In the process, she illuminates how an argument about language can have profound moral and political consequences—consequences that may transform our understanding of language as well as our ways of being in the world. What looks to be a paper about meaning turns out to be a paper about social/political engagement and the *constitution* of public life. That is an interesting turn, one that may help us make better political decisions by showing us how to engage in civil discourse.

Medina and Mercier set the tone for discourse that is not only civil but also critical and transformative. Matthew Crippen takes this up in a Marcusean critique of Wittgenstein that attends, among other things, to the place of silence in that discourse. Referring to Horkheimer's citation of the Latin aphorism that silence is consent, Crippen is critical of Wittgenstein's admonition that we must pass over in silence those matters of which we cannot speak. This raises fascinating questions for critical theory that Crippen explores particularly with reference to Marcuse's concept of one-dimensionality. To the extent that Wittgenstein's philosophy is "therapeutic," it may effectively *contain* dissent by "helping" dissenters become "well-adjusted." Marcuse, of course, was particularly concerned with the power of Total States—and particularly those engendered by advanced industrial capitalism—to contain dissent precisely by using therapeutic techniques to maintain adjustment. Bringing Marcuse and Wittgenstein together here has particularly explosive possibilities. In the context of a Total State, transformation depends on the possibility of calling the State into question from the inside (since "total" States systematically eliminate "outsides"). This is the point at which Wittgenstein's silence becomes most intriguing. What is it, we must ask, that we cannot say? Silence may be (as Martin Luther King, Jr. said) more than consent: there comes a time when silence is betrayal. But this is one of many places where it pays to look at what is done as much as what is said. What game, we might ask, is Wittgenstein playing? And, more to the point, what is the field of play that joins Wittgenstein and Marcuse? John Cage famously said "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it..." Crippen begins a process (via Wittgenstein) of putting poetry into play that has important implications for the public work of philosophers. I will have more to say about nothing to say—and the importance of saying it—when I turn to the last paper in this collection.

Keith Green and Richard Kortum bring a Fregean distinction to bear on the failure of meta-ethical theories to account for the elusive element of identifiably ethical expressions. They attribute the failure to a focus on two dimensions of semantics—Sense and Force—to the exclusion of a third—*Farbung*, which they translate with Dummett as "tone." They see "tone" as a key to understanding evaluative language and the relation of moral language to action motivation. Given the emphasis on transformation that emerges in the first three papers, this attention to action motivation raises interesting questions. Green and Kortum ask how evaluative language "moves" audiences and distinguish between pejorative/offensive language that "provokes" and moral language that "guides" behavior. The difference,

they say, lies neither in the “sense” nor in the “force” of a speaker’s language but rather in its tone. Most interesting, perhaps, is the extent to which Frege turns us here to dimensions that are not easily quantifiable—and not clearly descriptive—translated as “tone,” but variously associated with “coloring,” “scent,” and “illumination.” What moves an audience, it seems, is not simply the descriptive clarity or power of language but its color, fragrance, and light—all qualities that do not lie simply in the speaker, the audience, or the world, but in the interrelation of all three. This is fertile ground for philosophers and poets.

Elvis Buckwalter is certainly not the first to invite a psychoanalytic approach to literary criticism; but he ventures into less well-traveled territory when he asserts that it is particularly well-suited to postmodern writing. This is more suggestion than argument, but it is a suggestion worth pursuing—as the author notes—in greater depth (an apt dimension for a paper on psychoanalysis). The question is whether postmodern literature, released from the conscious manipulation that derives from the teleologically oriented metanarratives of modernism, is freed to expose more of the unconscious to analysis—to be *parole pleine* in Lacan’s terms—than is modern literature. Whether a psychoanalytic reading of Poe answers this or not, it does suggest that literary criticism can proceed in a manner analogous to psychoanalysis. Buckwalter compares this interpretive process to the talking cure, with the writer as “patient” and the reader/critic as “analyst.” I suspect there is something more dialogical going on and that it is not always clear who is analyzing whom—or who is being “cured.” There is, perhaps, a listening cure that parallels the talking cure, and the clarity the *analyst* achieves (particularly in reading a text) may be the most relevant catharsis. The idea of adjusting one’s analytic methods according to the type of text opens possibilities that I hope readers will be moved to develop further.

Shyam Ranganathan decries the separation of “translation studies” and philosophy of language that followed Quine’s conclusion that all translation is indeterminate. He pictures this as a separation of practice and theory: while philosophers theorize, translators must get on with the task of translation. They do this at least in part by abandoning theory and adopting a “pragmatic” approach to translation that leads them to focus on texts. One does not translate one language into another; one translates texts. And Ranganathan sees this text-centered approach as the beginning of a way to get philosophy of language and translation studies together again—a reunification he believes would be of benefit to both. What he proposes is a Text Type conception of semantics distinct from both contextualism and semantic minimalism. Texts do make their way across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and they do it in the context of institutions that both categorize and preserve them. While translation of one language into another is not possible, translation of texts in particular source languages to texts in particular target languages is—and that bodes well for communication. The “practical” spin is of particular interest—but also the abandonment of quests for a universal language. We may have texts in common if we work at it—and the working at it will constitute the “we” working as much as the text worked. That is promising.

Robert Harnish turns to Frege to illuminate the use of direct quotation, beginning the task of clarifying what quotations—and quotation marks—do in language. This is a close reading of a small fragment of a large theory that contributes to the clarity with which we use language but also to the clarity with which we criticize, appreciate, and understand its use by others. Harnish ends with a list of issues that could be taken as a research agenda for those who wish to fully explicate Frege’s theory of direct quotation. I hope readers will take up some or all of these issues and bring their articulation of Frege’s theory to bear on the kinds of practical issues with which this collection begins and ends.

Stephen Rainey begins with Austin’s recantation of his early view that “the supposed opposition between

performative and constative utterances” is marked by a clear distinction. Austin’s 1962 “recantation” is motivated in part by the recognition “that discussions of truth and falsity are not simply decided once and for all when a quality is ascribed to an utterance.” They are, Rainey and Austin agree, not “simply” decided at all. They depend not only on “facts” and their bearing on the utterance but also on an array of contextual factors associated with speaker and/or audience. Recognizing the complexity is a first step toward a more fully articulated theory of communicative action along lines developed by Habermas and Brandom. In these theorists, Rainey suggests, we move from consideration of “cognition and intersubjective understanding” to “self-understanding in a quite comprehensive way”—toward “what makes us each and together who we are.” That move is critically important for the connection between philosophy of language and ethics that is of interest in one way or another to all the authors gathered in this collection. Understanding how we live in language has implications not only for communication but also for the kinds of persons we become and for the shapes of the cities we make for ourselves and others.

In the last of the nine essays, Christopher Kelen wanders with Lewis Carroll’s Alice in the wood where things have no name because, “however digressive, Alice’s is always a practical exercise in the philosophy of language.” And the practicality of the exercise derives from the fact that “she always has circumstances from which to extricate herself”—and, we might add, they almost always revolve around problems of language associated with understanding, naming, and making oneself understood in unfamiliar territory. The unfamiliarity of the territory derives from being a stranger there, and, as every nomad knows, the process of making oneself at home in an unfamiliar place is often a matter of language. Kelen notes that in Alice’s looking-glass world, it is “through words” that “the certainty of words is challenged.” This responds to the concern that Crippen raises about Wittgenstein via Marcuse. The challenge in a world that is “a world of words to the end of it” (as Wallace Stevens put it) is to challenge words to the end, to speak (through silence or language, both of which are necessary to words) in settled and settling worlds in unsettling ways. This returns to the theme of *possibility*, subjunctive thinking, raised in the first essay. Wittgenstein’s admonition to silence may be seen as acquiescence or betrayal. But it may also be poetry (remember Cage), and one of poetry’s “necessary vocations” is “imagining the impossible.” Imagining the impossible, as Kelen notes, may mean being lost in translation—but it is the lostness of translation that raises possibility by being always unsettled, always unsettling, because, having nothing to say, it says it.

The poet is a perpetual foreigner, the philosopher (as Merleau-Ponty said) a perpetual beginner. And so we begin.

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